



# The Future of a Free Press in Central and Eastern Europe

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Hub Hub Palác Ara | Perlová 5, Prague 1

Organizers



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On November 8, 2022, the Aspen Institute Central Europe and Aspen Digital collaborated to bring ten globally renowned professionals together to discuss the Future of a Free Press in Central and Eastern Europe. During panel discussions moderated by Vivian Schiller – one on Broadcast News and the other on Digital and Print News – experts explored the independence of the region’s press and how to counteract rising hostility towards journalists. In both panel discussions, emphasis was placed on the rising trend of disinformation, the conflict between independent journalism and politically governed media entities, and how to reverse the downward spiral.

## Speakers

<b>Natalia Antelava</b>	Co-Founder of Coda Story, Tbilisi
<b>Petr Dvořák</b>	CEO, Czech Television
<b>Tikhon Dzyadko</b>	Editor-in-Chief, TV-Dozhd (TV Rain)
<b>Jamie Fly</b>	President, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
<b>Brygida Grysiak</b>	Deputy Editor-in-Chief, TVN24 Poland
<b>Márton Kárpáti</b>	CEO, Telex.hu
<b>Matúš Kostolný</b>	Editor-in-Chief, Dennik N
<b>Sevgil Musayeva</b>	Editor-in-Chief, Ukrayinska Pravda
<b>Andrea Procházková</b>	Deputy Editor-in-Chief, Respekt
<b>Martin Řezníček</b>	Deputy Editor-in-Chief, Czech Television
<b>Vivian Schiller</b>	Executive Director, Aspen Digital
<b>Milan Vašina</b>	Executive Director, Aspen Institute CE

Milan Vašina and Vivian Schiller opened the event followed by a video speech given by H.E. Mr. Mark Gitenstein, Ambassador of the United States to the EU, in which he expressed the vitality of maintaining media freedom, which he says “is a pillar of democracy”.

## Press Freedom and Sustainability

Funding enables media freedom, a point that was consistently raised during the discussions. For countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the fragility of free speech demands steady revenue in order to operate. Throughout the regions, countries face to fight for stable income that allows innovation and the ability to deliver vital news and information to the public.

In many countries, government controlled funding goes to entities that report favorably on those in power. “*Government friendly media outlets get much more money for advertising...from the government or state-owned companies,*” Grysiak described. Media companies prioritizing independent journalism, especially private outlets with out-of-country funding, are threatened and attacked. In countries like Hungary, which have state-owned advertising companies, funding goes exclusively towards the pro-government sites, distorting and polarizing the market.

In light of the current economic crisis, many people in Central and Eastern Europe are not willing to pay for subscriptions, which further weakens the sustainability of independent media outlets dependent upon subscription revenue. Czech private media are struggling to find the right “*sustainable and perfect model of newspapers to not be dependent on owners or subscription models because we don’t have the tradition of paying for news,*” stated Procházková. Musayeva elaborated on the dire financial situation in Ukraine, where the public is making donations to the military rather than paying for subscription-reliant media outlets. Instead, donations and grants from outside Ukraine have become a main source of funding.

Another discussion topic was the impact of social media on news organizations and their ability to reach audiences. Social media platforms can deliver advertising more efficiently, which means less funding to newsrooms. Worse, the content on those platforms is contributing to a harmful information environment. Antelava commented: *“The same platforms that give us a voice give voice to all sorts of other people. The business models of the platforms that we use to reach out to audiences are built around disinformation and fake news and clickbait.”* As a result, the public is confusing more and more disinformation instead of reliable reporting from fact-based, deeply researched journalists. This poses a new challenge for journalists: how to break through that noise with legitimate journalism. One solution the panelists shared is to be transparent about methods and principles, and engage in conversations with audiences about editorial decisions. Following the core values and principles of journalism and reporting *“nothing but the truth”* is one way journalists can break through the noise and gain trust back from a polarized audience, said Řezníček.

## Clash of Politicians and Journalists

The dynamic between the news media and the government was discussed extensively. Panelists agreed that journalists and politicians have different mandates, and as such are often in conflict. In the United States, the media is often referred to as the fourth branch of government because of its ability to check the government’s power. Just as every person has the right to free speech, so does every media company have the right to speak out against politicians’ actions and mistakes, demanding accountability. Similarly, panelists felt it was perfectly appropriate for politicians to criticize, question, and hold newsrooms accountable. *“The public will attack the media over everything. It is a part of the job,”* Řezníček explained. That said, political attacks on journalists are becoming increasingly invective and deliberate. As individual journalists, the importance of persevering through these attacks was discussed at length. Learning to persevere despite these attacks and continue to report without bias is crucial as reporting the truth cannot cease in a society that seeks to oppress it with disinformation and political agendas.

It has become more common for media companies to be bought out by local oligarchs with political influence. These newsrooms then become co-opted, undermining their journalistic integrity. Thus, the credibility of the media company comes into question: is it truthful, independent journalism or a partial agenda? E.g. Dvořák discussed at length how in 2013, Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš bought a large media company which he then singularly controlled. He censored his own newsroom’s reporting. *“Journalists should still be allowed to do what they do...and have their constitutional rights protected, but that is not the case,”* said Grysiak.

What can newsrooms do in the face of this kind of attempt at control? Journalists should speak out when they come under attack from a politician or government. Most governments, with a few exceptions, care about the criticism or at the very least, their public image. The panelists highlighted the toughness essential to being a successful journalist and fighting for the future of free press. The public’s right to unfettered reporting are at the core of journalism. Individual journalists must stand firm in their principles or else disinformation and politically-influenced media will prevail. This challenge is increasingly a global issue. Fly reasoned: *“No one is off limits. No media outlet has been spared from this”*.

## Risks of Authoritarian Governments and the Russia-Ukraine War

The Russia-Ukraine war has exacerbated the risks of being a journalist, specifically when reporting in authoritarian countries. Russia is a prime example, where it is no longer possible to operate without fear of harassment, physical threats and attacks even on reporters’ families. *“Our staff is not in Russia because TV Rain is still a ‘foreign agent’ (...) we are being considered as an enemy,”* said Dzyadko on having to leave Moscow. In past years, Russia and other authoritarian governments were willing to pretend they supported media freedom and allowed the physical presence of journalists they disagreed with. Today, there is a rise in the complete criminalization of journalism by authoritarian governments, following the example of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexandr Lukašenko. The criminalization

of journalism creates a challenge for journalists to maintain a report on authoritarian countries and provide vital information to citizens. For Russian journalists, there is an additional challenge of being associated with their home country's actions, making it difficult to maintain careers and visas in CEE countries because of prejudices against Russians. "For example, Latvia, they banned all Russian citizens from working visas," said Dzyadko.

While the Ukraine press faces no government pressure, they face different challenges as the public may reject as unpatriotic any negative reporting on the politicians or agencies at a time of war. "There still exists free speech and the fight for freedom of speech regardless if the public agrees with the timing" said Musayeva.

"The order is being rewritten around the world...we need urgency. We need to be coming up with new solutions, new networks, new collaborations with a sense of urgency," said Antelava.

### In summary, panelists agreed that journalists, reporters and news organizations:

- have the responsibility to report the truth,
- should actively participate in raising public awareness in why traditional journalism is important,
- should continue power-checking the government and politicians regardless of the timing or political climate,
- should be proactive about working with governments in press friendly government, to provide visas and safe spaces for endangered journalists,
- should not be influenced by the advertisement market and keep journalistic integrity,
- should continue fighting for a free press around the world.

### Governments and politicians should:

- respect the constitutional rights of free speech and a free press,
- stop extensive attacks on journalists and news organizations, and offer safe-havens for journalists under attack,
- not discriminate against anyone in invitations to press conferences, access to information, issuing visas, citizenships, or funding.

"Being transparent in the journalist's role is what will prove to the audience that journalism has a place and is relevant," said Fly. Journalists will continue to be under attack by both the government and public for the foreseeable future but panelists agreed that journalists must stick together in order to do this crucial work of informing citizens. Now more than ever, it is important to support independent journalism. The global fight against censorship and disinformation demands alliances and solidarity. Breaking through the noise of propaganda with factual, meaningful stories reported out of commitment to the truth will strengthen the trust in the media. The future of a free press and traditional journalism must be protected.

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*The event was organized in joint cooperation of the Aspen Institute Central Europe and Aspen Digital.*

#### Author

Alexa Wandersee

*student of B.A. in Journalism and Media Studies at Anglo-American University*

#### Edited by

Pavla Losová

*Program Manager, Aspen Institute Central Europe*

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